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ABSTRACT

Community college students are dropping courses at increasing rates at substantial costs to their institutions and themselves. Subsequently, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate this trend, the factors that influence it, and ways of reversing it. A recent study revealed that the most frequently cited reason for course withdrawal was job conflict--a factor over which the college has little control. Other reasons, however, were related to instruction, such as fear of not receiving a passing grade, inadequate prerequisite instruction, and dissatisfaction with course content and/or format. Attrition studies have also sought to discern patterns in the term in which students most frequently drop courses, faculty members' perceptions of the causes of attrition, the use of student support services prior to withdrawal, and course reenrollment. College withdrawal has also been the subject of several studies, which have shown that most of the reasons students give for dropping out of a college are not related to instruction, with major influences being job conflict and financial problems. Several ways of reducing attrition are recommended in the literature, including: (1) establish a testing program for guidance and placement; (2) promote student use of support services; (3) improve instruction; and (4) suggest staff consultations prior to course withdrawal. A bibliography is included. (AYC)

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JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

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WHY STUDENTS DROP COURSES

by Jack Friedlander

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES
Arthur M. Cohen, *Principal Investigator and Director*

ERIC

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Why Students Drop Courses

by Jack Friedlander

Community college students are dropping their classes at increasing rates. This trend has been documented nationwide, statewide, and at individual colleges (Daly and Bateman, 1978). Drop rates for individual courses typically range from 30 percent to 60 percent (Brightman, 1974; Friedlander, 1980b). To illustrate, a study of enrollment and performance in California's community colleges from fall 1972 to fall 1975 (Knoell and Others, 1976) revealed that students completed only 64 percent of the credit units for which they were enrolled in the first census week (fourth week of the term).

The cost of attrition in terms of state funds lost by a college is substantial. In the academic year 1978-1979 student attrition alone cost a community college in California over 2.5 million dollars in state funds (Rasor and Others, 1980). Of the money lost, 48 percent was due to class drops: one drop from a three-hour lecture class between census weeks (between fourth and eleventh week of the term) cost the college about $100 in lost revenue from the state; the other 52 percent loss in funds was due to withdrawals from the college.

In addition to the financial loss, the costs of attrition are considerable in other ways as well: to the students in terms of their time invested and their thwarted goals and to the community college in terms of its diminished reputation as a provider of educational services to the community. No wonder that a recently completed survey found that the topic in which the greatest number of community college administrators expressed high interest was student retention and follow-up studies (Lake, 1980).

Why do students drop classes? Why do they withdraw from college? Do those who reenroll in a course that they previously dropped perform well? And, ultimately, what can be done to reduce student attrition? Each of these questions is addressed in this *Junior College Resource Review*.

Reasons Students Drop Courses

In Sheldon and Hunter's (1980) study of California community colleges, students who dropped a course were asked to give up to three reasons for their withdrawals. The seven most frequently cited reasons were, in descending order, job conflict, inadequate preparation for the course, dislike of the class, assignments too heavy, indefinite motivation, illness, and dislike of the instruction. Thus the major reason for withdrawing from a course (job conflict) is one over which the college does not have much control. Conflict with work as the main reason for dropping a class was also reported in studies conducted by Thompson (1969), Brightman (1974), Martin (1975), Roane State Community College (1975), Larkin (1977), Matley (1978), and Hunter and Sheldon (1979). Other noninstructional reasons such as transportation problems, personal or family illness, and changes in plans accounted for less than 25 percent of the reasons students cited for dropping a course.

However, several of the other reasons given suggest that a sizable percentage of students withdraw from classes because they do not think they can successfully complete the course work. Among the instructional-related reasons for dropping classes most commonly cited by students in these studies were fears of receiving less than a passing grade, inadequate prerequisite instruction for the level of course work, dissatisfaction with course content and/or the manner of its presentation, course assignments too heavy, and failure to keep up with the course. The finding that many students drop classes for instructional-related reasons indicates that educators are in a position to influence considerably the rate of attrition from classes at their institutions.

Factors Related to Course Attrition

Several of the studies on course attrition were designed to address the following questions: When during the term do students drop out of courses? Why do faculty members think students withdraw from their courses? Do students seek assistance from the college support staff before they drop their courses? Do students who reenroll in a course from which they had withdrawn then succeed in that course?

A number of these questions were addressed by Brightman (1974) in his study of two California community colleges, Golden West and Orange Coast Colleges. According to his findings, over one-half of the students who dropped a course did so early in the term and 40 percent of these same students never attended the course; conflict with employment did not contribute to a student's propensity to drop courses. Only 9 percent of the students reported that they conferred with the instructor prior to dropping the course; and few students indicated that they took advantage of various campus support services, such as tutors or counselors. When asked if a discussion with a counselor would have been beneficial, 84 percent of the students who dropped a class at Arapahoe Community College (Arapahoe Community College, 1979) said yes while 77 percent of the students polled at Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College (Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College, 1980) said no.

The finding that most students who drop courses do so early in the term was also reported by Lamberts and Ellison (1976), Baratta (1977), and Garber (1979). Insight into why many students decide to drop courses early in the term is provided by Lamberts and Ellison (1976). These investigators found that 68 percent of the faculty and 75 percent of the students said that the prediction of a student's decision to drop a course was generally made by the fourth week of the term. When asked whether some preregistration testing for placement and guidance would be helpful, 77 percent of the faculty and 51 percent of the students answered in the affirmative.

Daly and Bateman (1978) discovered that two-thirds of the students who dropped a course noted that, although they were unable to continue the class then, they would take the class again at a later time. The question naturally follows: What percentage of the students who drop a class reenroll and succeed at a later date? Baratta (1977) found that 36 percent of the students who withdrew from all of their courses at Moraine Valley Community College returned. In their subsequent attempt to earn credit, they were unsuccessful. An analysis of

student course-taking patterns in the sciences was conducted in the Los Angeles Community College District by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (Friedlander, 1980a). Results of this study indicate that students who withdrew from their first science class completed a much smaller percentage of their subsequent science courses than students whose initial grade in science was C, D, or F; students who withdrew from a science course in fall 1978 were much less likely to enroll in a science course the following semester than students with grades of C or better; and students who withdrew from their first science course had a grade point average of C in their subsequent science courses. The findings reported by Baratta (1977) and Friedlander (1980b) are consistent with the thesis that many students withdraw from classes for academic-related reasons, such as found the course too difficult, got behind in work, lost interest, had too many course units.

Reasons Students Withdraw From College

In addition to transfer or goal completion, the causes of student withdrawal from college have been the subject of much research. Rasor and Others (1980) found that the main reasons students withdrew from American River College were financial/employment (40%), moving (14%), ill health (13%), personal problems (9%), and transfer (4%). Surprisingly, less than 10 percent of the students reported that they left the college because of academic problems. The finding that noninstructional reasons—program completion, job conflict, personal/financial/medical problems, moving out of the area, and transportation problems—were much more important determinants of student withdrawal from college than academic problems was also reported by Hall (1975), Stine (1976), Bennett (1977), Hinrichsen and Schaumburg (1976), Brunner and Others (1978), and Daly and Bateman (1978). The reasons that most students leave college are those over which the college has little or no control. Thus although institutions can devise support systems to reduce *course* attrition, dropping out of college must be seen as a separate phenomenon.

Reducing Student Attrition

Students who withdraw completely from college do so mainly for nonacademic reasons while many of those who drop classes do so because of academic difficulties. Recommendations for reducing the number of students who drop classes because of academic difficulties are listed below.

Establish a testing program for guidance and placement

Over 30 percent of the students studied by Rasor and Others (1980) identified the following areas as major reasons for dropping a course: found course content too difficult, did not have prerequisite or necessary background skills, got too far behind in course work, or had inadequate study habits. All these reasons reflect insufficient preparation for a course. This suggests that a testing program would do much to reduce course attrition due to inadequate academic preparation.

Results of studies conducted by Aarons (1975), Bohr and Bray (1979), Clark (1979), Rosetts (1975), and Stevenson (1979) demonstrate the value, in terms of performance and persistence, of testing students for the purpose of providing them with appropriate academic and support service programs.

Aarons (1975) compared the performance and persistence rates of students who had scored below the 50th percentile on the placement test and enrolled in a special educational foundations program at Mohegan Community College with those students who scored low on the test but did not participate in the program. The investigator found that students who participated in the educational foundations program had significantly higher grades and persistence rates than those who were not in the program. Another finding reported in this study was that there were no differences in the persistence rates of students who volunteered for the program and students who were pressured to enroll. Evaluations of the effectiveness of comprehensive developmental education programs at Sacramento City College (Bohr and Bray, 1979), Reedley College (Clark, 1979), Bucks County Community College (Rosella, 1975), and Macomb County Community College (Stevenson, 1979) have each shown that students entering college with academic deficiencies and who participated in these programs had higher persistence rates than students who did not take advantage of these programs.

Promote student use of college support services

Research (Brightman, 1974); Lambert and Ellison, 1976) shows that most students who dropped a class did not take advantage of college support services such as counselors, tutors, and study skills programs—all services designed to address many of the very problems students cited as reasons for dropping classes (inadequate study habits, test anxiety, enrollment in similar courses). Reports available in ERIC demonstrate that college support programs can have a positive effect on student persistence and performance.

Cohen-Benjamin and Others (1977) reported that students who used the services at Los Angeles City College's Learning Skills Center in the areas of basic math, basic English, accounting, business, and chemistry had significantly lower course attrition rates than students who were enrolled in these courses but did not take advantage of the Learning Resources Center. Atkins (1979) examined the effects of an orientation-advising program on retention rates of students enrolled in the Allied Health Division at Spartanburg Technical College. This program consisted of one all-day orientation and advising session, and individual advising sessions with counselors and faculty members throughout the year. A comparison of the attrition rates in the Allied Health Division before and after the program was implemented showed an increase in the number of students who completed their courses.

Perhaps the most effective method of reaching students who are experiencing academic difficulties in their courses is for colleges to develop a comprehensive program of diagnostic and remedial services. Such programs should also include a staff development component for the purpose of training counselors and instructors to identify and to help students with academic problems. An excellent outline of a program designed to help such students is presented in the California Community and Junior College Association Task Force Report (CCJCA, 1977). The program includes the following components: early identification by instructors of students having problems with the course; counseling services; tutoring; a learning resources center as a supplement to classroom instruction; and alternative instructional methods for students with different learning styles.

Improve instruction

Several of the reasons students dropped classes were related to the way an instructor handled the course, such as boring, disorganized, or inappropriate presentations; uninteresting subject matter; and a lack of the instructor's rapport with students. The influence that faculty members can have on course achievement and retention is illustrated in a study (Chausow, 1979) of instructors in the City Colleges of Chicago who had over 90 percent student retention rate in their courses. The results of this study showed that their courses were well structured, they used materials related to students' needs, and they did not rely heavily upon lectures. Above all, these instructors took a personal interest in each student. Specific approaches associated with an increase in student

course completion rates included the following: use of taped comments by the teacher about student compositions; availability in the library of videocassette modules explaining economic concepts; use of the individualized computer-based PLATO system; and use of mastery learning techniques.

Results of a faculty workshop on methods of reducing the high course attrition rate at Jefferson Community College are reported by Horvath (1979). One of the outcomes of this workshop was the development of a handbook of ideas to encourage student retention through faculty-student interaction, general classroom management, and student and faculty initiated activities.

Encourage students to meet with a college staff member before dropping a class

Most students who drop a class do not notify the instructor and do so simply by not returning to class (Matley, 1978). One consequence of this phenomenon is that instructors do not know why students drop their classes (Lamberts and Ellison, 1976). Encouraging students to discuss their reasons with an instructor or advisor before a withdrawal grade is granted would enable the college staff to identify those students experiencing academic difficulties and to assist them in completing courses.

Conclusion

With a rise in the percentage of nonproductive grades—W (withdrawal from a course), NCR (no credit received), I (incomplete), and WF (withdrawal from course while failing)—comes an increase in demands for academic and financial accountability. Some students who withdraw from a class or a college do so for reasons over which the college has little control, such as change in work schedule, illness, family responsibilities, transportation, and financial difficulties. However, a substantial number of students who drop out of classes do so because they are experiencing academic difficulties in areas over which the college staff can have a high degree of influence and for which the college in many cases has supportive apparatus. The challenge facing community college educators is to devise strategies for identifying and assisting these students who experience academic difficulties before they withdraw from their classes.

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